

Guidance for employers following easing of COVID-19 **LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS – Returning to work**

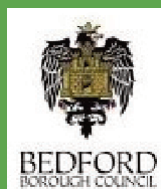
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Public Health Workplace Health Team



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1. Introduction

As well as having serious implications for people's health, COVID-19 has significantly impacted businesses. For many working from home has become the norm. The new agile working arrangements and enhanced need for digital capability have tested some businesses, however, they have provided opportunities such as greater flexibility and a better work-life balance which benefit employee health and wellbeing.

This document aims to provide information and advice for employers and outlines the considerations they must make to ensure employee health and wellbeing.

Return to work principles

To support the return to work, employers must follow the 'Working Safely During Coronavirus Covid-19' guidelines, which can be found <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>. There is separate guidance for eight different work settings, all setting out the following five key points:

1. Carry out a Covid-19 risk assessment in consultation with workers or trade unions
2. Develop cleaning, handwashing and hygiene procedures
3. Help people to work from home
4. Maintain 2m social distancing wherever possible
5. Where people cannot be 2m apart, manage transmission risk, including additional signage displayed throughout the workplace to reinforce measures to avoid spread of infection

Employers should refer to the relevant guide(s) for the type of work undertaken and may need to refer to more than one guide as they consider what they need to put in place to keep their employees safe. It is important that clear and open lines of communication are maintained across the workplace and that employee health and wellbeing is considered and factored into every principle. Employers should also refer to Public Health England published action cards which can be found [here](#) provide guidance to different workplace sectors. The information contained in the cards provide key steps to quickly identify and contain any potential Covid19 outbreak.

2. Managing a return to the workplace

In considering if, and when, employees and teams should return to the workplace, employers will need to undertake a full risk assessment for their workplace. The Health and Safety Executive has provided guidance on [risk assessments during COVID -19](#). Employers will be required to adapt their assessments to meet specific, team and individual requirements. Employers should introduce any change to current working arrangements gradually, and not before Trade Unions and employees have been consulted.

Returning to a workplace will carry a greater risk for some employees, whilst for others, there may be reasons why returning to their normal place of work reduces health and safety risks and is a preferable option to homeworking. The following sections provide tips relevant for different workplace settings and outline the factors employers will need to consider in reaching decisions about the working arrangements for employees.

Tips for all workplace settings:

Employers must minimise the risk of coronavirus infection and ensure that staff numbers in attendance do not compromise the ability to adopt social distancing requirements. Safety measures must be clearly communicated to employees and reiterated regularly. Consideration should be given to employees for whom English is not their first language.

Employers should ensure enhanced measures to disinfect communal touch points and an enhanced cleaning specification. Employees should be encouraged to follow national guidance regarding handwashing and personal hygiene. Cleaning wipes should be made available for employees to clean work areas before they start to work and when they finish work.

Protocols should be developed for the safe use of communal parts such as corridors, kitchens and break out areas. In some situations, signage, screens or other barriers may need to be considered alongside considerations for safe access and egress from buildings.

Tips for office settings:

Employees in office settings should be encouraged to remain at the same desk as far as possible. This advice should be considered in the context of staff wellbeing and the need to move and take regular breaks away from a screen. Food and beverages should be consumed at desks to limit movement around buildings. Where face to face meetings are unavoidable, these should be arranged in meeting rooms large enough to maintain social distance and should be for as short a period of time as possible. Staff may consider arranging meetings outdoors in an open environment. A protocol for visitors will need to be developed.

Tips for non-office settings:

In addition to the above recommendations, employers should ensure that social distancing arrangements are in place as far as possible, and where this is not operationally possible, appropriate PPE and cleaning arrangements are adopted. Government advice is that for non-health and social care settings, there is very little scientific evidence of widespread benefit from PPE. Government advice on the use of PPE can be found [here](#). If face coverings are considered, it is important that hands are washed before putting them on and taking them off. Government guidance on how to make and wear a face covering can be found [here](#).

Tips for workplaces where close contact with people is unavoidable:

In these situations, appropriate work practices, PPE and cleansing regimes should be put in place, as identified in the COVID-19 risk assessment and in accordance with national guidance, to minimise risk as far as possible. Advice on practices for first responders and other specific work roles can be found [here](#).

3. Considerations for clinically vulnerable employees

The government guidelines have outlined the need to protect clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals. Employers should take account of that guidance in dealing with any employee who falls into a vulnerable category or lives with or cares for someone in a vulnerable category, particularly where returning to work from their normal place of work is being considered. Guidance relating to these groups can be found [here](#).

Extremely vulnerable employees:

These employees can go to work as long as the workplace is [Covid-secure](#), but should carry on working from home wherever possible.

All steps should be taken to enable these employees to work from home wherever possible, undertaking their own or alternative duties. Employers must explore all options to remove barriers to homeworking for this group (for example the necessary ICT equipment being in place).

If vulnerable employees cannot work from home, the safest available role should be considered for them and assessed to determine the acceptability of that risk. If suitable roles cannot be found, alternative options may need to be considered.

These employees could be advised to shield again if the situation changes and there is an increase in the transmission of COVID-19 in the community.

4. Considerations for other vulnerable employees

Black and Minority Ethnic employees:

Concerns have recently been raised in the UK due to disproportionately higher rates of COVID-19 in black and minority ethnic health populations (BAME) compared to white populations. In addition, an emerging finding from systematic reviews and data from the UK is indicating that particular conditions such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease and diabetes are more prevalent in people with severe COVID-19.

These conditions are also more prevalent in BAME populations and may explain the increased risk to this group.

Gender and age:

[Data](#) from the UK confirms that nearly two-thirds of COVID -19 deaths have been among men, with the rate of death being statistically higher in the over 60s. Further information on the effect of COVID-19 amongst different occupations can be found [here](#).

Disabled employees:

Employers will need to give consideration to responsibilities in relation to making reasonable adjustments for disabled workers and assessing the health and safety risks for new or expectant mothers. [Access to Work](#) may be able to help with reasonable adjustments for physical or mental ill health.

Domestic violence:

The health and safety risk from home working for victims of domestic violence could be significantly greater than the risk of attending the workplace. Where employers are aware of team members suffering from domestic abuse, they may consider that the normal place of work is a safer environment for the employee and give priority to them attending the workplace over other team members. Government advice on Domestic Abuse relating to Coronavirus can be found [here](#).

5. Further considerations

Transport:

Employers should encourage safe practices if car sharing. [Government guidance](#) currently states that workers using public transport should wear a mask or face covering.

Employers should consider whether changing start and finish times can be accommodated, perhaps introducing shift systems within workplace opening hours to adjust travel arrangements and help avoid the busiest times. This will also help to reduce the number of people attending the workplace at any one time and to better enable adequate social distancing. Employees may decide to cycle into work as a safer travel option.

Homeworking arrangements and Display Screen Equipment concerns:

Some employees will not have conducive working environments at home, or the necessary IT equipment to enable them to work safely or effectively. Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments can be carried out to identify any requirements to address health and safety issues. In situations where homeworking is anticipated to continue, employers should consider whether any specialist equipment, or additional digital equipment (e.g. screens, keypads etc.), or a change in working practice is required to meet DSE requirements.

6. Return to work tips and flow chart

Employees will have different views and feelings about returning to work, and employers will need to deal sensitively and supportively with any changes to current arrangements. Any proposed change will require a risk assessment to be undertaken in advance of the changes being implemented. The following practical measures may facilitate a smooth transition to help employees return safely:

- Involve employees in discussions regarding future working arrangements and reach solutions that are mutually agreed where possible. In the first instance, consideration should be given to the needs of individuals within the team, and issues that could impact on their suitability (or ability) to attend their normal place of work
- Hold one to one meetings with team members (via video/technology wherever possible) to address any questions or concerns and to explain any additional measures for the building/team or office environment and any personal circumstances that may impact on a return to the workplace or maintaining working at home
- Develop a Health and Wellbeing induction/welcome back briefing (perhaps via a video message) for returning to the workplace incorporating any revised building operational requirements such as entry and exit points, one way systems, communal areas, what employers are doing to keep staff safe, what employers expect staff to do in terms of complying with social distancing, and what to do if feeling unwell

CIPD have produced a flow chart to inform the return to work process. This can be accessed [here](#)

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